

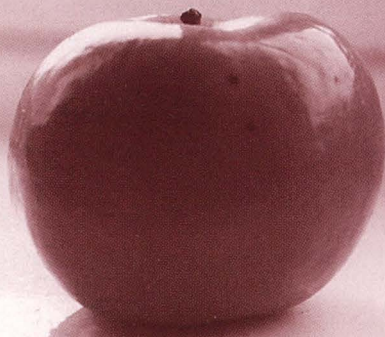


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TRAGIC TOURISM AND CANADIAN HISTORY: INVESTIGATING A RADZANOW STREET, A MLAWA APPLE AND THE GRAVES AT PRAGA

NORMAN RAVVIN



YOU MUST REMEMBER THAT MY PAST IS OVER THERE, ACROSS THE WATER.
THERE IS NONE OF IT HERE . . .

– *HENRY JAMES*

In my first year as Chair of the Institute of Canadian Jewish Studies, my students and I were often learning together, as we studied the work of historians who specialized in the Jewish experience in Québec and the rest of the country. My training in literary studies inevitably led us to Leonard Cohen, Mordecai Richler, and A.M. Klein as we examined the shifting sense of Jewish identity in Montreal. But the historians gave us another kind of ground to stand on. One of the most revealing pieces we looked at focused on the role of the Gradis family, whose merchant ships provisioned New France in its final years before the British conquest. Written by U.B.C. scholar Richard Menkis, this article examines the myths that have been generated concerning Abraham Gradis: on the Jewish side, commentators have claimed that he played a key role in the early colony's settlement, and that this constituted the bedrock on which early Québec-Jewish identity might be constructed. Gradis' early commitment, according to the historian Benjamin Sack, was proof that Jews have always been committed to the French fact in Canada. Among Québécois historians, such as Guy Frégault and Denis Vaugeois, this claim generated counterclaims, themselves as mythic as Sack's initial narrative. Gradis, these historians claimed, was no friend of New France, and could even be seen, through his relations with certain self-interested colonial officials, to have contributed to the colony's downfall. Menkis' convincing response to these claims and counterclaims is that they tell us very little about Québec history. Abraham Gradis never set foot in the colony, so it is a stretch to claim that his life was intimately bound up with its history. And to push his point home, Menkis reminds us how the "frenetic search for deep roots in the immigrant's country has all-too-frequently diverted the energy and attention of ethnic historians from important issues . . . In the case of Canadian Jewry," Menkis adds, "the proper background for Canadian Jewish history rests more in the historical experiences of the Jews in England, central and eastern Europe, and more recently North Africa . . ."

Here, Richard Menkis is right. Many of us have history on this continent that is only one or two generations deep. I am a westerner by birth, and a first generation Canadian. My mother was born north of Warsaw, my father south of

Moscow. And even though my mother's family first settled in Canada

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at one of the semi-legendary Jewish farming colonies in south Saskatchewan, and my father's family were among the oldtimers of Calgary's century-old community, I have always, quite unconsciously, thought of my family history as having taken place in Europe. An interesting view, considering that only one close relative,

my maternal grandmother, spoke at

length about her life in Poland. My father – the most Canadian of Jewish types – could only joke about the two or three words of Russian he'd learned in his father's house – one of which was *chleb*, bread.

During my teenage years and twenties the vogue for return trips to eastern Europe took shape, but this was not an open possibility among many of my closest family members. One uncle did go to Russia in 1972, mostly to see the Canada-Russia hockey series in Moscow. And my grandmother talked constantly about her two hometowns near Warsaw – Mława and Radzanów – without any inclination to revisit them. Jewish Mława and Radzanów had been obliterated along with most of her family. What was there to visit? was the question that didn't need to be asked.

Four years after my grandmother's death, I began work on a novel that is set partly in her old home towns. I've used these places before – in an earlier novel and short stories – but in those

cases my grandmother's stories and my own research made up for the fact that I had never been to Poland. The action of the more recent novel takes place, in part, in contemporary Mława and Radzanów, as well as in contemporary Vancouver. To get things right I would have to go to Poland. But still I hesitated. Somehow, I resisted becoming part of the wave of North Americans exploring eastern Europe, a group one critic has called "tragic tourists". The visitors of my generation, indeed, almost all who have no experience of life in Europe, tend to travel in large tour groups to visit the death camps and places of resistance like the Warsaw Ghetto. Survivors are more likely to return to the sites of their own or their parents' youth.

Since the novel I'm at work on deals with the entanglements of Jewish life in Poland before the war and not with the Holocaust, I was not drawn to visit the places of the dead – Treblinka, in fact, is only an hour and a half from Warsaw by car. My goal is to imagine Poland before the war, as a place of living Jews, and after the war, as a place of living Poles, to some extent haunted by the Jewish dead.

In telling you the story of my travels I want most of all to tell a good story; but also to examine what we mean as Canadian Jews when we talk about "our history." And at the same time, I hope to suggest some of the dangers and difficulties of the kind of tour of recovery, or better, discovery, that I embarked on last spring.

It happened that the demands of foreign travel and the demands of fiction were jointly served by my decision to hire a guide in Poland. Sometimes, when I tell people I'm a writer, the first question they ask is, Where do you get your ideas? Young writers wonder this as well, as they try to decide what it is exactly they're sup-

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posed to describe in fiction. In my decision to bite the bullet and pay Zbigniew Polakowski his daily fee of \$100 US in exchange for his intimate knowledge of the area north of Warsaw, I inadvertently stumbled upon an unusual method for creating a character: I found I'd rented one.

The morning Polakowski came to my hotel in Warsaw to meet me and discuss our travel plans, he was dressed quite formally, as a businessman might. He carried a wide portfolio in which he had many maps. These he showed me to make a point – to draw a line around the Mława forest on the town's outskirts, or to mark off the distance between one town and another. But once we'd joined up a few days later to look around Warsaw, driving a car Polakowski had rented because his was in the shop, I got a sense of his humour and likability. There was eccentricity too – the way he would repeat place names in a tone appropriate for the consideration of philosophical terms. *Vistula*, he would say into the windshield, and then *Vistula*, as though the change in emphasis deepened the meaning of the word, suggesting its full power and importance.

Polakowski is average-sized, maybe sixty-five. He wears his hair quite long, parted on one side and brought around over his forehead and the crown of his head in a way that, on him, looks rakish. A band of hair across the back of his head is mustardy yellow, but the rest is white. He was probably handsome once, whereas now he exudes character and confidence, as well as humour. He was a boy during the war, and his father was executed at Katyn by the Russians, along with hundreds of Polish officers, but he has an impassive view of this: his father had fought in the first war, been decorated, and when you fight, it's always possible that you will suffer the consequences, and not your enemy. He said nothing of a mother, or siblings, of a wife or children. The most personal story he told had to do with the time he guided the Lauder family – Ronald Lauder, the heir to the Estée Lauder fortune among them, who was looking into opening a centre in Warsaw that would sup-

port a revival of the Jewish community.

"The man really got me in trouble," Polakowski said, "because when we said goodbye he gave me a bottle of perfume, which he told me only VIPs could get. It was made from a special formula. And I gave it to my girlfriend, who loved it. When she'd used it up she asked if I could get her some more. Which of course I couldn't. An energetic man like you? she wondered. But I couldn't explain to her," Polakowski laughed, "that I couldn't just call up Ronald Lauder."

The few other personal things I learned from Polakowski were connected with his political views, and other experiences he had guiding rich Americans around Poland. There seemed to be an endless stream of these men and their families returning to view the sad little settlements their parents had bid good riddance. Of one man, Polakowski recalled the turmoil

when his car, with the man and his wife in the back seat, got stuck in

mud near a village around midnight. The whole village woke up to help them. And the method the gathering folk came upon to get the car up on the road was for as many men as possible to encircle it and simply lift it up and out. Though Polakowski said it was obvious the villagers wanted nothing in return, the American insisted on giving each of them five dollars. "Five dollars!" Polakowski

laughed. "In those days a dollar was a fortune. The rent for a month might be two dollars fifty, so to them this was a fortune."

Polakowski told another story of a man who was a collector back

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home in America of steam locomotives, and who became excited when Polakowski said he knew where one was abandoned in the woods. When they arrived at the site, they found that the locomotive had been picked half clean for scrap, which astounded the collector. To him, this was a kind of abomination. Still, after he'd taken photographs he concluded that the remnants of the machine were worth buying. As they drove off, Polakowski noticed that they were being followed, and soon another car cut them off from the front. They were pulled from the car. The

American's camera was confiscated, as were Polakowski's papers. When Polakowski explained the point of the visit to the police who'd headed them off, one of them shouted, "The man is not only a spy, he is crazy!"

My visit to my mother's ancestral towns – Radzanow and Mlawa – included none of this familiar Soviet slapstick. It began at a deluxe hotel in downtown Warsaw, where Polakowski arranged for our snappy rental car. Driving out of the city we passed what seemed at the time to be an amazing sight, so strange in retrospect it is almost unbelievable – a dead man on the road, his head twisted weirdly, his scraped belly showing where his shirt and motorcycle jacket had been pushed up from his waist, the body twisted, too. A big body, the motorcycle at a distance of fifteen feet, and two helmets off in another direction to complete the triangle of awful luck on the blocked roadway. Cars passed in the oncoming lane and slowed as drivers stared. Police marched at a distance to their cars. No ambulance was nearby. The man might have been dead no more than ten minutes. This created an opti-

mal contrast, with the woman we passed a block away pushing her dog into the back seat of her car, and another, her hair dyed red, lighting a cigarette outside the iron gates of an ornate palace.

There was rain on the roadway. On the outskirts of Warsaw, Soviet housing blocks stood twelve stories high surrounded by trees. We skirted the Vistula, which looked like a long, wide brown bath of mud, and then we veered away along the main motorway. During martial law, on a Sunday like this, one might have seen ten cars between Warsaw and Gdansk. Gas was rationed and so expensive that highway driving was a luxury. We passed slow-moving toy-sized Fiats driven by red-faced men, their families packed in as tight as luggage. Riding a bike along the side of the highway was a long lean man, sitting high on his seat, a flattened hat crooked on his head.

By 9:30 we reached the turn-off for Radzanow, where the roadway crosses the Wkra River. We wound along a road lined with poplar and lime trees.

"Very delicate landscape," Polakowski sighed. "The colours are so beautiful. Fresh green. Fresh and green." And so they were. He pointed to a stork sitting on its nest, which rested atop an electricity pole, and told me there had been a campaign to set the nests above the poles on iron platters, to protect the birds from the wires. We passed a shrine at an intersection, where the devil was traditionally thought to wait to waylay travellers. This, the legendary version of the facts, which are that at the crossroads, in the old days, robbers would sit in wait for their victims.

We approached the centre of the settlement called Radzanow on what my grandmother used to call the Mlawer Gasse, a long winding roadway. A stork landed, wings wide. There were cows in the field behind houses, and mist over the escarpment where the Polish army made a hopeless three day stand against the Germans in the first days of World War II. All this seemed a landscape from another planet – a different world entirely from the ferocious getting and spending that had overtaken Warsaw since what

Polakowski calls the "change in the system." The circus-like hub-bub at the casinos on Jerozolimskie, the absolute elation on the faces of young women as they took off their coats in a casino's foyer. The clown act as every second man played at being James Bond, snapping open his cell phone and trotting this way and that, doing some bit of business above the roar of city traffic.

Compare this with the situation in Radzanow, once called a town, but now demoted to what the authorities call a settlement. A thousand people, an hour or so north of Warsaw, amid farm plots, ancient pine forest, the winding single lane that gives way to one of the three or four long main streets that meet at the centre of things, which was once a market, but is now an oblong patch of grass, trees, and paved pathways pointing toward the church where people are gathering on a Sunday morning, coal smoke in the air, the church bell ringing, it seems, a thousand times.

Polakowski stops one old man, explaining that we'd like to see where the Jewish cemetery was. The man explains that it would not be safe for him to be seen talking to us, and he will not show us the cemetery, because the same people are in power who were in power under the Soviets, and he would be a fool to be seen going there. All of this said, seemingly with pleasure, not rancour – a breezy brush-off. The next man Polakowski stops is older, at least 80. He explains that he doesn't live in Radzanow, but has come from five kilometers away to attend church. He is thin, wrapped in a boxy raincoat, a cap on his shrunken-apple head. He says he knows who has the key to the synagogue, if we'd like to go inside. Off he goes, then returns and points at a house a few doors off the central square. We go around back, and Polakowski raises his eyebrows at the set of house keys hanging in the door, a big city guy amused by small town ways. He knocks. A young man answers. He wears relatively expensive- and casual-looking American-style clothes. They talk in Polish. The man shakes Polakowski's hand then mine. He has boyish good looks, but there is something dead in his eyes, as if he might rather be asleep. He

tells Polakowski – as Polakowski explains to me in short-hand translation – that he doesn't have the keys to the synagogue but he can get them for us. His sister is in charge of the library, which is now housed in the synagogue. As he tells us we can go to get them – a drive, he says, of about eight kilometers – the man's father walks up, holding two handfuls of neatly cut kindling. He is stout, with a round face, sharp pouches under his eyes, very little hair except on the back of his head, and crooked teeth centred in a red face. The old man and his son are called Shnigorsky, and the elder Shnigorsky remembers one name connected with my family in Radzanow. He looks at me, pleased, as he tells Polakowski about the Margulies he was chums with as a boy. He remembers what this man's father did, but somehow this information eludes me as we begin our little tour.

We walk up one side of Radzanow's central square and then the other, as the elder Shnigorsky points at houses that were once owned by Jews. Here, he tells Polakowski, a man named Mitgang did such good tailoring the nobility came from the surrounding area to do business with him. Another was a glazier. Here, Margulies had a shop. There Ketlarchik produced cooking oil. The vacant building by the church was Krygierman's, both a tailor and a baker. He points to the building, and even a particular window where a rabbi named Mayevsky lived in an attic apartment with his daughters. I wonder, why does this man remember the daughters? In what strange way were they bound to their father, or together, and how did they become rooted in Shnigorsky's imagination? There is no mention of a rabbi's wife, as if it would be improper to

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talk of such things.

As Polakowski and the older man talk, the younger Shnigorsky offering little corrections and additions in Polish, another apple-faced octogenarian moseys up. He eyes us a little warily, says a few words to Polakowski, shakes my hand. I notice that along with this man's appearance we have begun to draw a crowd. Shiftless-looking men of all ages lean on bikes, sit on stoops, or just stand and stare, making no move to come closer, but remaining focused on us as we circulate. I take pictures through the haze of coal smoke. Eventually we get in our car and drive off toward another settlement, this one even tinier than Radzanow. We stop in front of the old man's daughter's house, and honk. Four big dogs come yap-ping across the yard at us. A young man, the daughter's husband, shakes hands all round. Then the daughter appears, looking as though she has just risen from bed, and returns to the house for the key. It turns out to be at least four inches long, with two sharp teeth – a skeleton key out of Edgar Allan Poe – and hangs on a chain that clatters the way I imagine a jailer's keys might.

We rumble back along the roadway, passing newish chicken coops that the Shnigorskys explain were built on government loans, but have almost all been bankrupted by competition from bigger businesses in Germany. The father and son are reasonably prosperous for this place, with 36 hectares under plow, a crop of rye and potatoes, plus seven cows, but they laugh when Polakowski exclaims that they are rich men. A rich man in Radzanow, it seems, is a comical idea.

Back at the centre of Radzanow we open the red brick synagogue. It is a hundred years old and smells of mold and damp wood. The bima and the ark have vanished, as have the rows of seats. The woman's balcony is in place above us, with views out over the hodge-podge rooftops of the town. In the sanctuary, kids' books and Polish history texts are lined up neatly on wooden shelves. The old man points to a shelf he says holds Jewish books, which isn't the case, but I do run across a shelf of material dealing

with the Holocaust. Then we are outside again. In my haste I forget to depress the reverse button that will let me rewind a finished roll of film, turn the reverse crank and hear the sound of film breaking inside my camera. I open the camera's back, knowing the last 36 shots – of Warsaw's heart, Lazienki Park, the Warsaw Ghetto and our approach to Radzanow – are wrecked. Well. So.

We'll go – says Polakowski – to the cemetery. This calls for another slow rumble along narrow roads. Past the mixture of 100-year-old timber houses, without plumbing or electricity, and more modern stucco buildings like that of the Shnigorskys. We stop on a sandy road on the edge of a tiny family farm. We get out. Pass a dog tied up, growling low, and brown hens scattering. Wood has been cut but left unprotected in the recent spring rains. The younger Shnigorsky takes a long leisurely piss on the firewood. We walk up a hill, a soft rise in the landscape marked by a wire running between low fence posts, and stand on a stretch of grassland. Once the Radzanow Jewish cemetery. Nothing remains of it, but Shnigorsky the younger tells Polakowski, and he me, that if you came here with a spade you would find gravestones. Now, I consider, there's a hopeless kind of work to pass a Sunday with.

We return to the car and rumble off through the mud. Polakowski, with a conspiratorial look tells me the young man has suggested we have a drink. There is a bar nearby where we can stop for what he calls a *kufelek*, which means, precisely, a small beer. The bar is housed in a trailer that stands in the centre of a muddy piece of ground. Inside benches and tables are squeezed up against the plywood walls, looking oddly like indoor picnic tables. A woman stands behind a raised counter at the back. She has a young hard intelligent face, dyed blonde hair, eyes that squint a bit against the exhale of her cigarette. I ask for five beers, but she brings ten, and there's laughter as she takes five back. Our younger guide opens two of the outsized bottles by angling their tops together, hands me one, and proceeds, open-throated, to pour the entire bottle directly into himself as if we've been doing hard

labour and he's got a mighty thirst to quench. There are three young men seated in the bar, lean, hardy and good-looking. They smoke and down beer with ostentatious pleasure while their elders attend Sunday services. Each one points his cigarette into the heaping ash tray and slowly turns it so the glowing butt drops off. Two older, somewhat scruffy men come in and sit with us. As the smoke rises and the beer goes down, Polakowski becomes entranced by a story the men tell – which I will only find out about later, since there is no opportunity to shout translations across the room.

The young men wonder first why I'm there. *He's a Jew*, explains Polakowski. They are surprised. Had they mistaken me for some roving *National Geographic* photographer?

Ask him what happened to Aronek, one of the young men tells Polakowski. *Maybe he knows what happened to Aronek*. The others laugh. Aronek, it turns out, was a Jew who owned a house near the synagogue; the lone Radzanower to return alive from the death camps. He came back to arrange to leave for good, and he engaged

the help of the second shrunken-apple-headed man we'd spoken to, who'd approached us warily in the central square, asking why we'd come before he shook my hand. Aronek had left some things with this man – six chairs, a bedspread – and made arrangements for him to guard his house. He'd be back to take the things away. Where to, no one knew. But he vanished. Aronek vanished. And the rumour went around that his supposed guardian had killed him in order to keep his

property – the chairs, the bedspread, and the house, his prize. The man was accused. He denied the crime. He was half believed, and came up with alibis – Aronek had sent him letters from his new home. *Well, show them*, his townsmen told him. A week later he

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would claim the letters had been buried in his grandmother's coffin. *We'll dig her up*, the men offered. But here the joking stopped, and the apple-headed man – a younger version of himself, probably wearing a younger man's version of the same oversized cap – managed to evade punishment. He lives to this day, at least until the smokey Radzanower Sunday on which I saw him, in Aronek's little red brick house by the shul. 82 years old. Probably a murderer. Probably hating the sight of me, as I might be some grand-grand-nephew come Aronek inheritance hunting.

All of this came out in the course of five or ten minutes of chatter among thirty-year-old men who knew every in and out and irony of a 55-year-old story.

"It is a dangerous story," Polakowski says to me as I put away the last of a beer and we get up to go. Our young guide is surely drunk himself, and we shake his hand as he wavers unsteadily in the mud lot outside the bar.

There was no moment finer than this in all my time spent in Poland – this wild eruption of the past, still so present in the imaginations of young and old men alike, whom we'd found, absolutely by chance, wandering along the old market street, downing outsized Polish beers in a trailer decked out as a bar. Even while it was happening I wished a friend of mine who makes documentary films were there to capture it all. But of course, if a camera had been there, if the event had been planned, it could not have turned out this way at all.

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After Radzanow I spent a fruitless afternoon in Mława – my grandmother's second home – a bigger place half an hour down the road, with a modern economy focused on technology

and many new flats built on top of bulldozed prewar structures. Strangely, some transformation overtook Polakowski – an almost Alice-in-Wonderland deflation of his energy and mettle; he seemed to have lost his interest in engaging passersby in conversation, and suggested I go off for a walk myself.

In Mława the synagogue is gone – forgotten – and the cemetery on the outskirts of town is a typical hodge-podge of commemoration and desecration: shards of tombstones, broken up at the order of the occupying Germans, have been gathered and reassembled into an oddly brutal sculpture, made mostly of cement. Only at a distance can a visitor tell that what rises from the cemetery earth are the sticks of a partially submerged candelabra. The Nissenbaum Foundation, a Warsaw-based philanthropy devoted to refurbishing ruined Jewish cemeteries, has erected a plaque, a brick gate, and a wrought iron fence that surrounds the burial ground. But the locals have picked the fence apart, removing nearly half of it in the dead of night to make use of it on their own property.

This hopeless cycle of energetic efforts met with vandalism haunts every Nissenbaum project I saw in Poland. The saddest example was in the big old graveyard across the Vistula in Praga, once a Jewish quarter of Warsaw. There the Germans forced slave labourers to drag masses of huge stones into piles, *mazevot* were folded into each other like playing cards to be used as paving stones. But this gathering is as far as the work went. Polakowski thinks six men could have moved each stone together. And Jews, he reminds me, did this work. But the memorial where a few uprooted stones were gathered and set upright in a circle has been smashed; the front gate and commemorative plaque is splattered with purple paint. Garbage and liquor bottles are scattered around. Is this some kind of redemptive work, to go on repairing and then having these things destroyed? It strikes me as a task out of Beckett or Camus. A hopeless existential challenge. The stones given special attention and set into the memorial have suffered the

worst indignity, a second smashing, while those left in piles, unmoved since the war, seem to sleep, peaceful, under the wavering birch. To me, this is a truly awful place. Granted, it conjures the awfulness of the Germans, the stupidity of their ideas, the depth of lousiness of having to do a dishonest day's work for them. But the place itself is awful. A graveyard of graves in tree shadow, within earshot of the Warsaw traffic.

It seems to me now that my disappointment in Praga – my sense of the utter devastation wrought by the vandals of memory – and my satisfaction at Radzanów were not merely coincidental; rather, these two places taught me that the possibility of recovering something of the past is most real where there is some form of connection, however tenuous, between the traveller and the place, a fuller sense of why one has gone to a site: a house or friendship or network of livelihood to be traced. All of this, quite to my surprise, reared up at me at Radzanów, where it seemed I could enter the daily life of the place, even for an afternoon, and become a part of the present, which was full, in some shadowy way, of my family's past. As the sites I visited grew larger, and my situation in them more anonymous, such possibilities grew fewer. In Mława I walked as much like a ghost as anything else, alien, looking over the shoulders of the overflow church crowd to try and see what made the people all go down on their knees at once. Only in the market, when I asked how many zlotys for an apple, did I enter the city's fabric for a moment. The market woman smiled, telling me that if I only wanted one I could have it for nothing. This gift, and her smile, seemed to be a token of welcome, but based on what urge I couldn't say. Possibly she wanted to extend a courtesy to a foreigner as a kind of local gallantry. In the Praga graveyard, there was no hope of any such courtesy. The sighing trees and heaps of grave-stones were capable only of breaking one's heart, and they defied any likelihood of a link between the past and the present afternoon. On the edge of the burial ground, in a century-old timber

house Polakowski assured me had once belonged to Jews, a Polish couple washed their car in the sun while their poodle chased soap suds in the street. Somehow Radzanow, a place empty of Jews, turned me into an actor, a receiver of a story alive enough to be called dangerous. These were the paradoxes of my Sunday travels in Poland. To get to my history I had to avoid the obvious, the sacred – in Polakowski's words – sites of commemoration and mass death, and explore the most hidden

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of places where a Canadian Jew's history was fairly freely taken hold of under the eye of the nesting storks, over an out-sized beer at a corner bar not far from where my grandmother was born in the days before the Bolsheviks.

One steps away from such encounters changed, but in some way painfully the same.

At my trip's end I waited for a connecting flight in a sparkling café at the Copenhagen airport. Planes

were disappearing into the clouds. They came up from behind the terminal, rose into the middle distance, and then nosed into the grey mass hanging over the airport. For a moment, a plane would seem to hang in the sky, then it went fuzzy, grey, and disappeared. On the ground an endless line of cabs, two abreast, pulled up to the exit doors, green lights lit on their roofs to signal that they were free.

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